"Miserable Offenders"

An Interpretation of Prayer Book Language

C. S. LEWIS

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One of the advantages of having a written and printed service, is that it enables you to see when people's feelings and thoughts have changed. When people begin to find the words of our service difficult to join in, that is of course a sign that we do not feel about those things exactly as our ancestors. Many people have, as their immediate reaction to that situation the simple remedy — "Well, change the words" — which would be very sensible if you knew that we are right and our ancestors were wrong. It is always at least worth while to find out who it is that is wrong.

The Lenten season is devoted especially to what the theologians call contrition, and so every day in Lent a prayer is said in which we ask God to give us "contrite hearts."[1] Contrite, as you know, is a word translated from Latin, meaning crushed or pulver-

1. The Lenten Collect is appended at the end of this paper.

ized. Now modern people complain that there is too much of that note in our Prayer Book. They do not wish their hearts to be pulverized, and they do not feel that they can sincerely say that they are "miserable offenders."[2] I once knew a regular churchgoer who never repeated the words, "the burden of them (i.e. his sins) is intolerable",[3] because he did not feel that they were intolerable. But he was not understanding the words. I think the Prayer Book is very seldom talking primarily about our feelings; that is (I think) the first mistake we're apt to make about these words "we are miserable offenders." I do not think whether we are feeling miserable or not matters. I think it is using the word miserable in the old sense — meaning an object of pity. That a person can be a proper object of pity when he is not feeling miserable, you can easily understand if you imagine yourself looking down from a height on two crowded express trains that are traveling towards one another along

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2. The General Confession at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, which is appended.
3. The General Confession at the Holy Communion, also appended.

the same line at 60 miles an hour. You can see that in forty seconds there will be a head-on collision. I think it would be very natural to say about the passengers of these trains, that they were objects of pity. This would not mean that they felt miserable themselves; but they would certainly be proper objects of pity. I think that is the sense in which to take the word 'miserable.' The Prayer Book does not mean that we should feel miserable but that if we could see things from a sufficient height above we should all realize that we are in fact proper objects of pity.

As to the other one, about the burden of our sins being intolerable it might be clearer if we said 'unbearable', because that still has two meanings; you say 'I cannot bear it', when you mean it gives you great pain, but you also say 'That bridge will not bear that truck' — not meaning 'That bridge will feel pain', but 'if that truck goes on to it, it will break and not be a bridge any longer, but a mass of rubble.' I wonder if that is what the Prayer Book means; that, whether we feel miserable or

not, and however we feel, there is on each of us a load which, if nothing is done about it, will in fact break us, will send us from this world to whatever happens afterwards, not as souls but as broken souls.

But are we really to believe that on each of us there lies something which if not taken off us, will in fact break us? It is very difficult. No man has any natural knowledge of his own inner state and I think that at the beginning we probably find it much easier to understand and believe this about other people than about ourselves. I wonder, would I be safe in guessing that every second person has in his life a terrible problem, conditioned by some other person; either someone you work for, or someone who works for you, either someone among your friends or your relations, or actually someone in your own house, who is making, and has for years made, your life very much more difficult than it need be? — someone who has that fatal flaw in his character, on which again and again all your efforts have been wrecked, someone whose fatal laziness

or jealousy or intolerable temper, or the fact that he never tells the truth, or the fact that he will always backbite and bear tales, or whatever the fatal flaw may be, which, whether it breaks him or not, will certainly break you.

There are two stages, I think, in one's approach to this problem. One begins by thinking that if only something external happened; if only after the war you could get a better job, if only you could get a new house or if only your mother-in-law or daughter-in-law was no longer living with you; if something like that happened, then things would really be better. But after a certain age you no longer think that, because you know for a fact, that even if all this happened, your husband would still be sulky and self-centered, your wife jealous or extravagant, or your employer a bully, or someone whom you employ and cannot dispense with, a cheat. You know, that if the war ended and you had a better job and a new house, and your mother-in-law or your daughter-in-law no longer lived with you, there would still be that final flaw in "so and so's" character.

Perhaps in one's misery, one lets out to an intimate friend a little of what the real trouble is, and your intimate friend says, "Why do you not speak to him or her? Why not have the matter out? They really cannot be as bad as you think." But you say to yourself "Oh! He doesn't know," for of course you have tried again and again to have the matter out, and you know by bitter experience that it will not do the slightest good. You have tried it so often, and you know that any attempt to have it out will only produce either a scene or a total failure of understanding; or, perhaps worst of all, the other person will be kind and equable, and entirely agree with you, and promise to be different. And then in twenty-four hours everything will be exactly the same as it always has been!

Supposing you are not mistaken, misled by your own anger or something of that sort. Supposing you are fairly near the truth, then you are in one sense getting a glimpse of what God must see all the time, because in a certain sense He's up against these people. He is up against their problem as

you are. He also has made excellent plans; He has also again and again done His part, by sending into the world prophets and wise men and at last Himself, His own Son. Again and again His plans too have been shipwrecked by that fatal flaw in people's character. And no doubt He sees much more clearly than we do; but even we can see in the case of other people, that unless something is done about their load it will break them. We can see that under the influence of nagging jealousy, or possessive selfishness, their character is day by day ceasing to be human.

Now take a step further. When God looks into your office, or parish, or school, or hospital, or factory, or home, He sees all these people like that, and of course, sees one more, the one whom you do not see. For we may be quite certain that, just as in other people, there is something on which our best endeavors have again and again been shipwrecked, so in us there is something quite equally fatal, on which their endeavors have again and again been shipwrecked. If we are beginners in the Christian

life we have nothing to make the fatal flaw clear to ourselves. Does the person with a smelly breath know it smells? Or does the Club bore know he is a bore? Is there a single man or woman who believes himself or herself to be a bore or temperamentally jealous? Yet the world is pretty well sprinkled with bores and jealous people. If we are like that, everyone else will know it before we do. You ask why your friends have not told you about it. But what if they have? They may have tried again and again; but on every occasion, we thought they were being queer, that they were in a bad temper, or simply mistaken. They have tried again and again, and have probably now given it up.

What should be done about it? What is the good of my talking about the fatal flaw if one does not know about it? I think the first step is to get down to the flaws which one does know. I am speaking to Christians. Many of you, no doubt, are very far ahead of me in the Christian way. It is not for me to decide whether you should confess your sins to a priest or not (our Prayer Book leaves that free

to all and demands it of none)[4] but if you do not, you should at least make a list on a piece of paper, and make a serious act of penance about each one of them. There is something about the mere words, you know, provided you avoid two dangers, either of sensational exaggeration — trying to work things up and make melodramatic sins out of small matters — or the opposite danger of slurring things over. It is essential to use the plain, simple old-fashioned words that you would use about anyone else. I mean words like theft, or fornication, or hatred, instead of "I did not mean to be dishonest," or "I was only a boy then," or "I lost my temper." I think that this steady facing of what one does know and bringing it before God, without excuses, and seriously asking for Forgiveness and Grace, and resolving as far as in one lies to do better, is the only way in which we can ever begin to know the fatal thing which is always there, and preventing us from becoming perfectly just to our wife or husband, or being a better employer or employee.

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4. Exhortation, Prayer Book, p. 86, especially the last paragraph.

If this process is gone through, I do not doubt that most of us will come to understand and to share these old words like "contrite", "miserable" and "intolerable".

Does that sound very gloomy? Does Christianity encourage morbid introspection? The alternative is much more morbid. Those who do not think about their own sins make up for it by thinking incessantly about the sins of others. It is healthier to think of one's own. It is the reverse of morbid. It is not even, in the long run, very gloomy. A serious attempt to repent and really to know one's own sins is in the long run a lightening and relieving process. Of course, there is bound to be a first dismay and often terror and later great pain, yet that is much less in the long run than the anguish of a mass of unrepented and unexamined sins, lurking the background of our minds. It is the difference between the pain of the tooth about which you should go to the dentist, and the simple straightforward pain which you know is getting less and less every moment when you have had the tooth out.

1. Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This Collect is to be said every day in Lent, after the Collect appointed for the day, until Palm Sunday.

2. Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from the ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant,

O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. *Amen.*

3. Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men; We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter Serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(From the American Book of Common Prayer p. 124, p. 6, p. 75.)

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